
SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of the Meeting held in the Council Chamber - Swale House on Wednesday, 11 February 2015 from 7.00 - 8.58 pm.

PRESENT: Councillors Sylvia Bennett, Andy Booth (Chairman), Lloyd Bowen (Vice-Chairman), John Coulter, Mike Henderson, Peter Marchington, Prescott, Ben Stokes and Ghlin Whelan.

OFFICERS PRESENT: Joanne Hammond, Zoe Kent and Bob Pullen.

APOLOGY: Councillor Jackie Constable.

486 MINUTES

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 28 January 2015 (Minute Nos. 452 – 454) were taken as read, approved and signed by the Chairman as a correct record, subject to the following amendments:

Minute No. 454 Draft Budget 2015/16, Appendices Question 1 to insert the following wording at the end of the sentence: “or other possible alternatives be considered to benefit the regeneration of Sittingbourne”.

Minute No. 454 Draft Budget 2015/16, Main report Question 3 to be amended to read: “Did recent changes to health workers pay have an impact on staff salaries at SBC?”.

The Minutes of the Special Meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 12 January 2015 (Minute Nos. 418 – 420) were taken as read, approved and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

487 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No interests were declared.

PART B MINUTES FOR INFORMATION

488 UPDATE ON WELFARE REFORM

The Chairman welcomed the Assistant Revenue and Benefits Manager and the Cabinet Member for Finance to the meeting to provide an update on welfare reform.

The Cabinet Member for Finance praised the Assistant Revenue and Benefits Manager for her hard work on implementing the new welfare reform proposals. He welcomed the proposal for a Job Centre Plus presence in Swale House and at Sheerness Gateway, and the training of benefits staff to provide budgeting advice.

The Assistant Revenue and Benefits Manager referred Members to the tabled report which provided an update on Discretionary Housing Payments and Universal Credit. In addition to the note she advised that the initial phase of Universal Credit would be for single people who were likely to be non-dependents. Benefits officers would be trained to provide budget advice but specifically not debt advice.

In response to a question, the Assistant Revenue and Benefits Manager confirmed that the consultation on Discretionary Housing Payments had been promoted through the Council's website, Facebook, Twitter, press releases and on letters sent to landlords.

A Member raised concern that a lack of flexibility restricted people from moving to alternative accommodation even when there was a demonstrable need. Councillor Mike Henderson proposed the following motion: "That our Housing Department discusses with Amicus Horizon and other Housing Associations to allow greater flexibility where it will help to provide extra or smaller properties". This was seconded and upon being put to the vote was agreed.

A Member asked how many claimants had internet access and could the Benefits Team write out to all claimants to advise them of the consultation.

The Assistant Revenue and Benefits Manager advised that no information was available on how many claimants had internet access and advised that it was not viable to write out to each claimant separately due to the cost involved. However, a note would be added to the end-of-year letters sent out in March.

A Member asked what support had been offered by Housing Associations to advertise the consultation. The Assistant Revenue and Benefits Manager confirmed that the Housing Associations had been advised and they had offered to include information on the consultation in their newsletters to residents, which the Assistant Revenue and Benefits Manager confirmed would be followed up.

- Assistant Revenue and Benefits Manager

In response to questions regarding Universal Credit, the Assistant Revenue and Benefits Manager explained that the first phase was aimed at those claimants who were fit for work. The process would be reviewed again after the General Election but the principle was to encourage people into work. She explained that Swale, Maidstone and Ashford had been chosen for the first phase in Kent as the Councils had good working relationships with the Job Centre Plus for their area. The decision not to pay Universal Credit into Post Office accounts had been taken by the Department of Work and Pensions.

A Member considered that there was a lack of information available to residents on the housing register and the process for bidding for properties; in particular, can residents be moved down the priority list once bidding had closed, and what happened after the bidding process has completed. The Assistant Revenue and Benefits Manager undertook to take these comments back to the Head of Housing for consideration.

- Assistant Revenue and Benefits Manager

The Chairman thanked the Assistant Revenue and Benefits Manager and Cabinet Member for Finance for attending the meeting.

RESOLVED:

(1) The Scrutiny Committee proposes to Cabinet that our Housing Department discusses with Amicus Horizon and other Housing Associations to allow greater flexibility where it will help to provide extra or smaller properties.

489 REVIEWS AT FOLLOW-UP STAGE AND LOG OF RECOMMENDATIONS

The Committee noted the log of recommendations.

490 OTHER REVIEW PROGRESS REPORTS**(i) Contracts and Procurement**

The Chairman drew Members' attention to the notes of the Review Team meeting held on 27 January 2015 with officers and the Cabinet Member for Finance.

Councillor Ben Stokes (Review Coordinator) advised that the Review Team would be meeting on Tuesday 17 February 2015 to consider the findings from the recent meeting and to decide whether a report and recommendations were required for submission to the next meeting.

Members made the following comments: there had been a lack of progress updates on the work undertaken to-date and the purpose of the review was not clear; the Committee should conclude this review as there did not appear to be any recommendations arising?; the review needed to address the recent changes in the structure of the contract and procurement team, the revised strategy documents and whether this had resulted in improvements and the impact of the changes; and it may have been beneficial for the officers and Cabinet Member for Finance to be invited to a Committee meeting so all Members could ask questions.

Discussion ensued and it was agreed that the Review Group would feedback to the next meeting on whether a formal report with recommendations was required, or if the review could be concluded.

(ii) Asset Transfers

The Chairman drew Members' attention to the notes of the Review Team meeting held on 27 January 2015 with officers and the Cabinet Members for Finance and Localism, Sport, Heritage and Culture.

Councillor Peter Marchington (Review Coordinator) advised that the Review Team would consider the findings from the recent meeting and decide whether a report and recommendations were required for submission to the next meeting.

491 CABINET FORWARD PLAN

The Committee reviewed the Forward Plan and discussed the following items:

Fixed Penalty Notice (FPN) Pilot

Members specifically raised concern regarding the proposal to remove the reduction in the charge for all environmental FPNs paid within the first 7 days. They made the following comments: was it constitutionally correct to take this decision within 6 months of the Fees and Charges being agreed by Council?; this proposal had not been scrutinised, which was disappointing as the Scrutiny Committee expressed interest in FPN charges when it reviewed the Fees and Charges report; what were the current FPN charges?; would this proposal lead to more debt to recover at more cost to the Council?; and what was the potential cost saving or cost to the Authority?

Councillor Mike Henderson proposed that if this decision was approved at Cabinet on 11 March 2015, the Chairman be asked to call-in the decision using the procedures as set out in the Constitution. This was seconded by Councillor Prescott and upon being put to the vote was agreed.

Forum Shopping Centre, Sittingbourne

The Committee considered that it was essential that this report was considered by the Scrutiny Committee.

Councillor Mike Henderson proposed that following consideration of this item at Cabinet on 11 March 2015 the Chairman be asked to call-in the decision using the procedures as set out in the Constitution. This was seconded by Councillor Ghlin Whelan and upon being put to the vote was agreed.

Newington Car Park Retaining Wall

The Committee requested that further information on this report be circulated to the Committee in advance of the report to Cabinet on 11 March 2015.

RESOLVED:

- (1) That if the proposal set out in the Forward Plan in relation to Fixed Penalty Notices is approved at Cabinet on 11 March 2015 the Chairman will call-in the decision using the procedures as set out in the Constitution.***
- (2) That following consideration of the Forum Shopping Centre, Sittingbourne report at Cabinet on 11 March 2015 the Chairman will call-in the decision using the procedures as set out in the Constitution.***

492 URGENT BUSINESS REQUESTS

There were no urgent business requests.

493 COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME

The Committee reviewed their work programme for the next meeting on 19 March 2015. Alongside the standing quarterly reports the following items were agreed: contracts and procurement review conclusions; asset transfers review report; update on progress with the economic development review; scoping template for the Housing Review and two potential call-in items, as minuted above.

Chairman

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All Minutes are draft until agreed at the next meeting of the Committee/Panel